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LODI LEGION AND THEIR PICNIC

By Ralph Lea

▲ *Lodi American Legion Picnic – May 1, 1926, at Clements by the river, featuring baseball.*

The war to end all wars, the war against Germany, now called World War I was touch and go when the U.S.A. declared war April 6, 1917. Over fifty Lodi boys signed up to defend our country within a week. The American doughboys and supplies from our factories helped end the war November 11, 1918.

This American expeditionary force was still in Europe and the U.S. men in Paris, France when they founded the American Legion for veterans and was incorporated by an Act of Congress on September 16, 1919. By this time the boys were back home. Lodi businessmen and all the citizens held a formal homecoming Wednesday, June 4, 1919 for the Lodi veterans.

The Lodi Post #22 of the American Legion came into being on December 21, 1919 with a temporary charter and 143 members.

A permanent charter was signed August 10, 1920. The first commander was Archie R. Stephen, a U.S. Navy veteran whose service dated back to the Spanish American war. Stephen was the engineering officer of the U.S.S. Maine, the famous battleship that was blown up in the Havana Harbor. It so happened that Stephen was on shore February 15, 1898 when

▲ *Lodi Legion cleaning up the brush in 1927.*

the Maine went down with 264 men and two officers on board. Stephen managed to obtain a piece of timber from the wreckage and as a result, underwent court marshal for taking government property. The penalty is not known but he was able to keep the ship's wood and had a gavel carved with Stephen's name inscribed, and served the Commanders of Lodi Post as a most historic treasure.

Walter E. Garrison, Colonel during World War I, was elected the Second Commander of Lodi Post and served two terms. A.M. Barton was elected next but was unable to complete the full year. Arthur Tindell completed the year and was then elected for the year of 1924.

The first meeting place of the Lodi Legion was held in the Lodi City Hall, 114 N. Main Street. The room was cramped for the many members. The group tried different locations. They met for a while upstairs in the Beckman-Welch-Thompson Hall on School Street which was later the Fuller and Son's Sporting Goods Store. The next move was to Pine Street. Upstairs in the Cary Building the where V.F.W. held their meetings. Finally the Lodi Legion Post moved to the Eagles' Hall on the

▲ *Micke Grove, 1927. Legionnaires ande policeman Ralph Boyd and Avery White digging 130-foot well by hand.*

northwest corner of Sacramento and Locust streets. This would be the meeting place for over twenty years until the permanent home at 320 North Washington Street was built and dedicated October, 1950 with Ellsworth Beckman as Commander at that time.

After World War II the many veterans were returning home and the Eagles' Hall proved too small for the many new members. Even before the second war the Post made an effort to obtain the old Salem School site. Instead the City of Lodi took possession and later it became a Safeway store. Next, a site near Hale Park was considered but failed to meet approval. Finally four lots on Washington Street were chosen but legal technicalities arose. The location was a part of Lawrence Park and could not be secured by outright purchase.

It was discovered, however, that it could be acquired by trade.

Public Joined Move

The post had nothing to trade, but surmounted this obstacle by investing $5,000 in property that was a part of the softball park and exchanging it for the land on Washington Street.

Legionnaires did the excavation work, with the aid of the county, which needed the dirt. Actual construction was done under private contract. Funds to finance the building were raised through public subscription to the amount of $150,000, making the project a real community enterprise.

Since its creation the American Legion has dedicated itself to programs for veterans, child welfare, Americanism, national security and community betterment.

In order to provide finances for the many projects Victor Myers and Ted Elwert originated the yearly May picnic. The first of these successful get-togethers was held at Clements where other groups had picnics for years. A year earlier the Legion had begun to sponsor the Boy Scout Troop Number 22, which was also the Post's number.

The Lodi Legion members were aware that William Micke had pur-

chased the 464 acre Simpson-Grey ranch south of Armstrong Road at the Southern Pacific Railroad. Mr. Micke planted 400 acres to Tokay vineyard in 1920, the year he acquired the property but saved the remaining 64 acres of beautiful oak trees for a recreational area. The Legion talked to Mr. Micke, well known as a public spirited citizen about holding their picnic at his grove and he agreed to lease the place, Pixley Grove to the Post for ten years at a dollar a year if they would clear away the brush, put down a well for water and run an electric line from Armstrong Road.

The Legionnaires went to work every weekend to clear the poison oak and tangled brush. A 130-foot deep well was dug by hand. They built an open air dance platform, a number of concession stands, and a baseball diamond.

The 1927 Legion picnic was a great success for the Lodi area citizens and the Lodi Post treasury. In January of the next year the Lodi Legionnaires were building a boy scout cabin at the south side of Micke Grove and by March they started clean up of the Grove. They installed water pipes around the grounds and constructed lavatories. They extended the dance floor for seating and added a roof for the orchestra and new booths.

Archie Clossen, Commander of the Lodi Post #22 in 1928 set the date for the annual picnic for Saturday, May 5th at Micke's Grove. Archie, the village blacksmith, would be the state head of the Legion seven years later as well as National Committeeman.

Clossen named J.W. Carter General Chairman for the second year plus Avery White, Perry Clark, W.M. Babcock, Leroy Cross, Vic Myers, E.F. Graffigna, W. Moran, Jack Melby and N.D. Shank, Post Adjutant. Shank announced the Post had 167 paid up members.

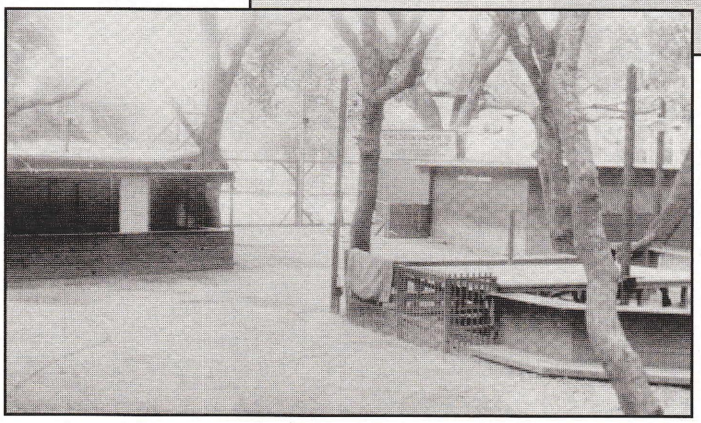
Committees

Hot Dogs & Coffee: W. J. Comar-

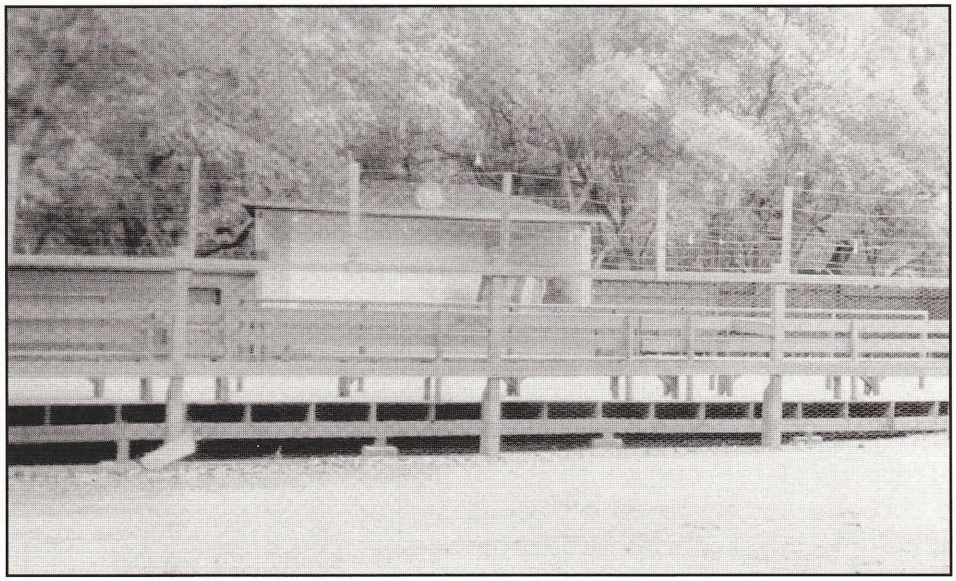
1927; Lodi Legion Post #22 hard at work building Micke Grove. ▲

Lodi Legionnaires erecting power lines at Micke Grove in 1927. ▲

▶ *Micke Grove, after improvements by Lodi Legion.*



◀ *Micke Grove, 1927. Entrance to dance floor and refreshment stands.*



▲ *Micke Grove open air dance floor in 1928, with roof for band and seating installed.*

tin and Earl Burlington; Bingo: George Islap, E. J. Stuckenbruck, W.C. Hogemann; Soft Drinks: William Preszler; Dance: Ralph Boyd and Lester Wilson; Balloons: Lloyd Vizelich; Transportation: P. J. McLaughlon, A. J. Graffigna, and L.G. Brown; Traffic: A.L. (Army) Armstrong and boy scouts; Athletics: L.H. Bluck; Features and Entertainment: W.E. Garrison and W.F. Elliott; Electric Service: H.S. Hook, E.F. Cain and George Hieb; Publicity: A. J. Randolph; May Pole Dance: Janet Gowie, Rev. D.T. Gilmor, Dr. E.V. Thompson and A.T. Hargis.

The May Pole Dance would begin at 9:00 a.m. with grammar school children from Emerson, Lincoln, Needham, Victor and Henderson. D. Thompson was to take moving pictures of the May Pole and other events. A sixty youth band from Sacramento was to play at the picnic as well as the newly formed Lodi Legion Drum Corps.

There was a baseball game in the afternoon of picnic day and six weeks later the Lodi Post organized the Lodi American Legion Junior Baseball Team.

The Legion grew each year with more visitors, events and a carnival with side shows. The free entertainment was popular. The picnic would expand into a two-day event, Saturday and Sunday, the first part of May. One of the events was a raffle. A brand new car was given away on the last day.

In 1938 when Micke Grove was deeded by Mr. and Mrs. William Micke to San Joaquin County the Lodi Legion rented each year for the next 28 years. The county rates were $12

▲ *Northern California Junior Legion Champions, 1927. Back row (r to l): Casey Moore, right field; Calvin Talman, pitcher; Lloyd Engel, right field; Archie Clossen, George Ray, Swede Johnson and Hanly Sato. Middle row (r to l): Kitty Wilson, M. Okaraki, shortstop; R. Bettencourt, left field; Leon Mettler, catcher; William Gillespie, Tony Bettencourt, and Allan Atherton. Front row (r to l): Robert Ray, Marv Mettler, Tadioake Kishada and Adolph Lahman.*

for public picnic and dance, $50 for private picnic and dance, $25 for just a private picnic and $5 to $10 for Sunday School picnics.

Another annual event of Lodi Legion was the children's Easter egg hunt. The Lodi Legion received a lot of help since 1921 from the Lodi Unit #22 American Legion Auxiliary. Lillie Shealor was the first president with Mattie Steele, secretary. The early members made poppies to sell on Memorial Day. Later the veterans in hospitals made the flowers.

The ladies helped with the Legion monthly dinners, started in 1946 and the OctoberFest beginning in 1963.

When the World War II veterans started returning to Lodi the membership of Lodi Post increased until in 1956, had reached 687 and Ben Schaffer completed his term, and John Burrel was Commander.

The Lodi Legion Post #22 has always held a highly respected position in the Lodi District and took justifiable pride in their Memorial Building which compares favorably with Legion buildings in cities many times the size of Lodi. The National Commander had Lodi on his list to visit for many years. Lodi was fortunate to have some of the most talented veterans to lead the Post and the fellowship that prevailed between World War I veterans and the later World War II and Korean veterans was outstanding. The early veterans who developed Micke Grove as a picnic area were an inspiration to those that followed.

The Lodi Legion had many programs from community bet-

1962, Memorial Day. L-R: Arnold Mettler, Carl Klaffke, Kitty Wilson, Ray Bender, Jim Boyd, Larry Pfelee and Robert Edgecomb. ▲

◀ *1962 Legion Picnic, Harold Jones and 19-month old Bobby Van Ruiten.*

TWENTY-SECOND ANNUAL

LODI LEGION PICNIC

Micke Grove --- May 13-14, 1944

COMMANDER'S WELCOME

Lodi Post No. 22, The American Legion, again welcomes you to its Annual Picnic at Micke Grove.

Through the cooperation of the U. S. Navy and the U. S. Army there are displayed here many of the precision instruments of modern warfare. We hope you will take the opportunity to familiarize yourselves with the tools of your sons' craft. The spacious lawn, entertainment and concessions are for your pleasure. We hope that you will enjoy this picnic as our guests.

FRANK H. WATSON Jr., Commander

ROSTER OF OFFICERS

Lodi Post No. 22, The American Legion

Commander ..... Frank H. Watson Jr.	Sergeant-at-Arms ..... Martin Schmitt
First Vice Commander	Historian ..... Martha Ross
H. W. "Jeff" Davis	Jr. Past Commander ... Harold E. Bell
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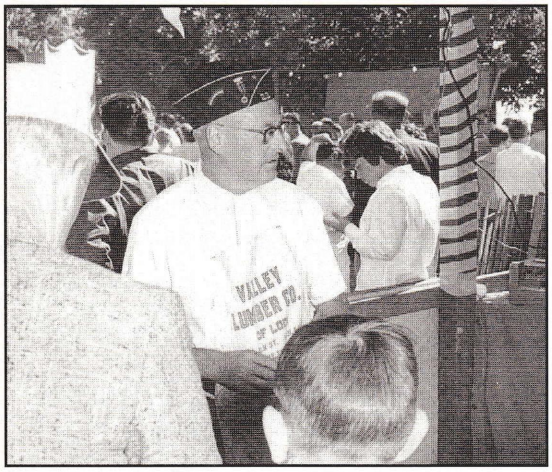
Finance Officer ..... Chas. Boynton	Dan Young, Dr. E. M. Felendorf, Reg
Chorister ..... Rev. S. W. Gross	Hirb, Asstv. Sydet Re-elected—A. L.
	Closson, V. W. Hoffman.

▶ *Front of the 1944 Lodi Legion Picnic Program.*

1962, Lodi Memorial Cemetery; Color bearers for Memorial Day. Auxiliary from the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Lodi Legion Auxiliary, Gold Star Mothers and the Hartford Womens' Relief Corps. ▲



▲ *Pete McLaughlin at the 1962 Legion Picnic, wearing a Valley Lumber vest for change.*

◄ *1962; Annual Hard Times Party to celebrate the fall harvest. Larry Moore (winner) and Ken Hust.*

Overview of the huge crowds attending the Legionnaire Picnic in the 1960's. ▲

▲ *1962; New car give-away at the Lodi Legion Picnic.*

Legion Easter Egg Hunt at the Festival Grounds during the 1960's. ▲

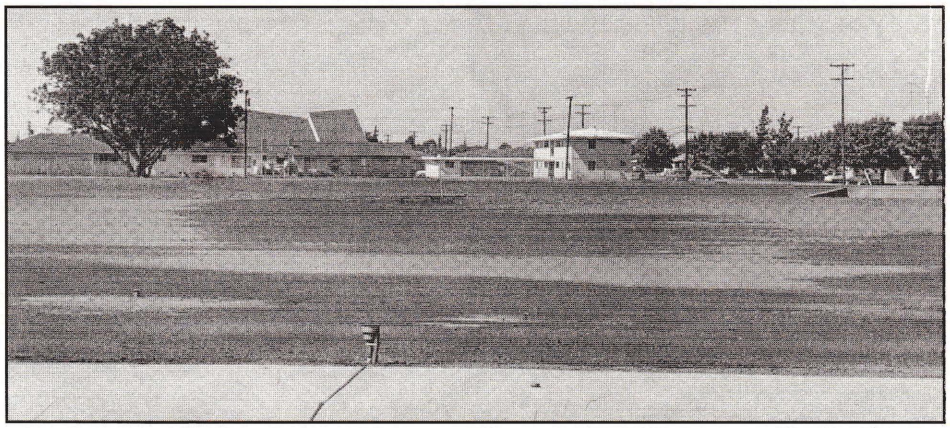
terment such as the annual Christmas decoration contest for live trees both large and small plus yard decoration, and the annual Easter egg hunt. In 1962 the Legion and Auxiliary colored over 200 dozen Easter eggs and added 350 pounds of candy hidden all over the festival grounds. This was all recovered in a minute after the gun fired. Christmas stockings were filled each year for veterans' children living in the area.

To raise money to support these events plus the creation of Legion Park dances for young people were held, but the main source in the 1960s was still the annual picnic. It was now a three-day affair with square dancing, carnivals, variety shows and the Saturday Field Day starting with the boy scouts raising the American flag. It included the popular sack, potato and three-legged races. A nice feature at this time was a presentation of the five Grape Festival Queen candidates. The Lodi Legion Ritual team was state champion in 1962.

Legion Park

The City of Lodi Recreation Director, Ed DeBenedetti proposed a park at the northwest corner of Hutchins and Vine streets. Ray Bender, Commander of Post #22 and the members, now composed mostly of World War II and Korean veterans attacked this job just like the World War I veterans had built Micke Grove Park some 35 years earlier.

The City approved the plan, the Legionnaires pulled existing vineyards, graded the land, fertilized and planted the grass. The City completed the other work except the fountain which the members and Fred Brown & Sons completed. The City of Lodi named the area Legion Park.



1962; Legion Park at the corner of Vine and Hutchins Streets. ▲

▲ *1962, Armed Forces Night. Wallace Street, A.J. Randolph, Fred Bitterman and Dick McLaughlin try on the old uniforms.*

References & Credits

The archives of the San Joaquin County Historcal Museum.

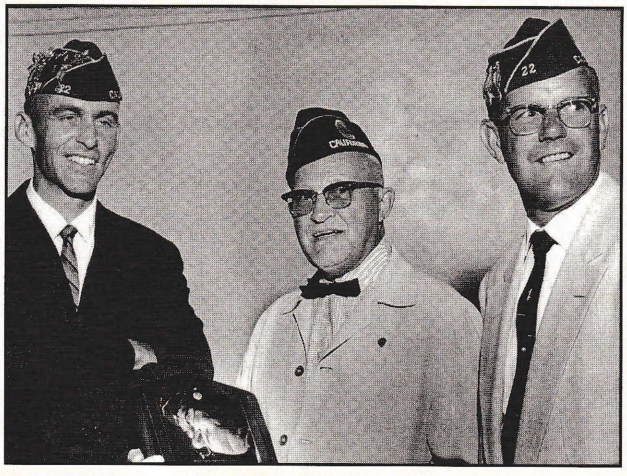
The files of Ralph Boyd, Bill Micke and the 1928 Lodi Sentinel.

The Ray Bender album of his commander year of 1961-1962, provided by Esther Bender.

Pictures from the San Joaquin County Historical Museum, Ray and Esther Bender and the John Guilfoyl collection.

The aid of San Joaquin County Museum Collections Manager, Debbie Mastel and Sally Laughman, layout artist for Duncan Press.

1962 Lodi Post #22 Ritual Team State Champions. ▲ Front row, l to r: Walt Jacobsen, Les Bishofberger, Ben Schaeffer and Fred Muther. Back row, l to r: John Burrell, Ben Selover and Dick McLaughlin.



▶ *1962; Installation and presenting Carl Klaffke as Outstanding Chaplain of 800 state posts. L to R: Ben Selover, Carl Klaffke and Ray Bender.*

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